Sketch

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Nineteen Fifty Six

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Abstract

I HADN'T seen the police car when I first emerged from the wooded area beside the house. My bare arms and neck seemed to glow from the warmly penetrating rays of the sun. A barbed-wire fence stood between me and the house which was small and shabby against the green cotton fields surrounding it...

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by Ortis Cortel Johnson

Poly. Sci., Junior

I HADN'T seen the police car when I first emerged from the wooded area beside the house. My bare arms and neck seemed to glow from the warmly penetrating rays of the sun. A barbed-wire fence stood between me and the house which was small and shabby against the green cotton fields surrounding it. There were five lines of wire and I chose to go through the third and fourth wires since they were closer to the ground. I was small for a five year-old, but I wasn't small enough to slide under the wire. I was careful not to damage the violets I had found in the woods. When I had seen them from a distance, the dew on the vibrant purple petals looked like jewels placed on pillows made of the dead-looking brown mosses. Not wanting to destroy their beauty in my climb through the fence, I threw them over to the other side. Grasping the fourth and fifth wires in my hands, I lowered my head and put my left leg over the clasped wires. Then I brought my head clear to the other side, shifted my weight to my left leg, brought my right leg through, and finally stood up and let the wires regain their former state.

I picked up the flowers and started skipping toward the house. The fragrance of the violets seemed to mix with the dust which I was kicking up, and my bare black feet looked gray and ashed. Then glancing toward the house, I saw a big green car sitting out front. It had writing on the side of the door like the highway patrol cars that went past the farm at least twice a day; my brothers and their friends would lie in wait for them in the ditch along the highway and shower the cars with dirt clods. I could just picture them being caught by one of these mean-looking men. I dropped the

flowers in the road and ran for the house.

When I got there I saw my sister, Mae, sitting on the edge of the porch with only her black bony feet extended from beneath her old and faded blue dress. A young man who looked younger than Mae stood about five feet from her and brushed a lock of his sun-bleached blonde hair out of his red face. Even from the back one could tell that he wasn't a very experienced policeman; his large black boots had hardly a speck of dust on them, and the olive green uniform was new and neatly pressed.

"Now ya'll seem ta be law 'biding fokes, an' . . ." the policeman said, pausing long enough to wave his right hand toward a swarm of insects. ". . . AN' I'm jest doin' what the law seys I hav' ta . . ."

He seemed to be doing all of the talking and my sister just sat and stared at him. Distress clouded her prominent facial features, but only for a moment, for her large black eyes were glued to the face of the stranger.

After a few moments had passed, he raised his voice, clenched his fists, and asked, "Well . . ., are ya' gonna' give me the money . . . ?"

I stood there trying to figure out what they were talking about, so I jumped at the creaking sound of an old cane-bottomed rocking chair situated behind my sister on the porch. The rocker was dirty-gray, and shabby like the three-roomed house, for both had been ill-treated by the elements and neglected by man. Mae sat with her back against one of the two by fours that kept the whole structure from collapsing. The policeman nervously glanced toward the dark doorway, while Mae acted as if she hadn't heard the noise.

"We don' hav' the money," she said.

He acted as if he didn't know what to do, but one could tell that he was becoming very impatient. His left hand returned again and again to the butt of the gun which was in a holster situated on his left thigh. He was yelling something to Mae that sounded like "I'm suppos' ta collect that money. . . . an' I ain't leavin' here without it. . . ."

I finally realized that they were talking about the $7.50 that my sisters was supposed to pay in order for my brothers to go to school. Sam and Johnny had been fighting on the way home from school and had laid their schoolbooks on the bridge over McPherson's creek. During the fight, the

books slipped off the bridge and into the grime and muck below it, and $7.50 was the cost of replacing the books. They couldn't go back to school until the books were paid for, and they had been out for at least three weeks. I knew that Mae didn't have the money and wouldn't have it until Papa came back from Vicksburg. With the boys home from school, he had gotten his crop of cotton picked and baled early and had gone to Vicksburg to find a buyer. Miss Green, their white teacher, must have sent the police out to collect it.

The policeman stood in silence and stared at the girl who stared back at him. Beads of perspiration seemed to come from nowhere and matted the loose strands of hair along the crown of his cap.

I was brought back to reality when the man emitted a muffled whimper as if he were going to cry. He dropped his left hand to his holster and removed the gun. He pointed it straight at Mae's head! I tried to shout something, but my words got caught between a sob. Mae glanced towards me. I could see the horror in her eyes.

The man sensed that there was someone behind him, so he swung around like the cowboys do in the movies, and slowly started to squeeze the trigger of the gun.

The cold, gray steel was aimed at my forehead! My arms and legs were heavy and awkward—I couldn't move. I glanced down the tunnel-like barrel of the gun. It seemed to extend infinitely.

I had seen guns before and I wasn't afraid of them. I was thinking to myself of how different this gun looked and what it would be like to die. I wondered if there would be lots of blood like there was the day when Reed cut his stomach on the hoe he was sharpening, or whether I would lie on the ground and stare at nothing like the dogs that my Aunt Martha had shot for killing her chickens. Then I wondered if they would put me in a wheelbarrow and take me out to the pasture for the vultures to come and pick my eyes out like they did the dogs. Finally, I wondered what would happen to this man if he killed me. Zeke Jones, a black man who lived down the road from us, had killed a white man in self-defense and had gone to prison.

Maybe he realized how silly it was for him to be standing there pointing his gun at a dirty-faced little black girl who looked puny and sickly in her handed-down faded dress

that was two sizes too big—I'm not sure. But he put the gun back into the holster and backed back to his car. He got in and left in a cloud of dust and sand. When the dust had finally cleared, I remembered my flowers and I wanted to show them to Mae. I ran to where I had dropped them. The violets lay crushed and soiled in the road.

First Time

by Janis Mitchell

History, Senior

HE FUMBLED the key into the lock and hesitantly pushed the wooden door open; a burp of detergent-smelling air rushed up his nose. The "Welcome, Neil" sign fell off the door as he cautiously reached to turn the lights on. Gingerly picking it up, he placed it on the dustless desk. The expanse of white concrete wall was broken by the empty wastebaskets, the naked beds, the uncurtained windows, the empty closets.

"Neil, where are you?" his mother's voice yoo-hooed from down the hall.

"I'm in here," he squeaked back.

"Oh, isn't this a nice dorm?" she said, coming into the room. "And what's this?" She inspected the welcome sign. "Isn't that sweet, Neil Baby?" She handed the placard to him.

Neil rubbed his clammy fingers over the rough construction paper. He gulped. Blood rushed to his head. He crumpled the sign into a little ball. Pling! It hit the bottom of the metal wastebasket.